Wednesday, December 13, 2000

The New Case for Latin

Some schools find that kids learn more about English by studying the language of ancient Rome

BY MIKE ESKENAZI

Amy high is decked out in the traditional pink dress and golden stole of ancient Rome. She bursts into a third-grade classroom and greets her students: "Salvete, omnes!" (Hello, everyone!) The kids respond in kind, and soon they are studying derivatives. "How many people are in a duet?" High asks. All the kids know the answer, and when she asks how they know, a boy responds, "Because duo is 'two' in Latin." High replies, "Plaudite!" and the 14 kids erupt in applause. They learn the Latin root later, or side, and construct such English words as bilateral and quadrilateral. "Latin's going to open up so many doors for you," High says. "You're going to be able to figure out the meaning of words you've never seen before."

High teaches at Providence Elementary School in Fairfax City, Va., which has a lot riding on the success of her efforts. As part of Virginia's high-stakes testing program, schools that don't boost their scores by the year 2007 could lose state funding. So Fairfax City, just 18 miles southwest of the White House, has upgraded its two crumbling elementary schools with new high-tech television studios, computer labs and one very old feature — mandatory Latin.

Here lies one of the more counterintuitive developments of the standardized-testing movement: Though some critics complain that teachers are forced to dumb down their lessons and "teach to the test," some schools are offering more challenging course work as a way of engaging students. In the past three years, scores of elementary schools in high-stakes testing states such as Texas, Virginia and Massachusetts have added Latin programs. Says Allen Griffith, a member of the Fairfax City school board: "If we're trying to improve English skills, teaching Latin is an awfully effective, proved method."

This is not your father's Latin, which was taught to élite college-bound high schoolers and drilled into them through memorization. Its tedium and perceived irrelevance almost drove Latin from public schools. Today's growth in elementary school Latin has been spurred by new, interactive oral curriculums, enlivened by lessons in Roman mythology and culture. "One thing that makes it engaging for kids is the goofy fun of investigating these guys in togas," says Marion Polsky, author of First Latin: A Language Discovery Program, the textbook used in Fairfax City.

Latin enthusiasts believe that if young students learn word roots, they will be able to decipher unfamiliar words. (By some estimates, 65% of all English words have Latin roots.) Latin is an almost purely phonetic language. There are no silent letters, and each letter represents a single sound. That makes it useful in teaching reading. And once kids master the grammatical structure of Latin — which is simple, logical and consistent — they will more easily grasp the many grammatical exceptions in English.

In the 1970s and '80s, the U.S. government funded Latin classes in underperforming urban school districts. The results were dramatic. Children who were given a full year of Latin performed five months to a year ahead of control groups in reading comprehension and vocabulary. The Latin students also showed outsize gains in math, history and geography. But Congress cut the funding, and nearly all the districts discontinued Latin.

Some curriculum experts have examined the evidence and still favor modern languages instead of Latin. John Chubb, chief executive of the Edison charter schools, said the company decided to make Spanish, not Latin, mandatory in its elementary schools because "we want our kids to be socialized to the outside world."

Still, Griffith, the Fairfax City school-board member, believes that "so far, the Latin looks like a good investment." He took encouragement from the confident smiles of Amy High's students each time they correctly responded to a question. "They're so receptive," says High. "They don't even know they're learning."